



Pick Your Path to Health

Warriors of a Special Kind

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Summertime is PowWow time, Sundance time on the Prairie, family reunion time, a time for celebration and ceremony. One of my favorite PowWows happens over Memorial Day when veterans are honored and celebrated.

At Grand Entry, those of us who form the outside circle stand at attention, hats off, in respectful silence. The dancers enter the arbor from the Eastern gate, led by the Elders carrying the Eagle staff, the coup stick, and the flags of many nations. In circling the drums, the dancers retrace the sun's daily journey through the sky and return to the place they entered. Then there is a prayer, a blessing, and a giveaway. Grand entry concludes with a Veteran's song acknowledging their struggle, their sacrifice, and our joy that they are with us that day.

At the PowWow I go to, those who fight substance abuse stand with those who have fought in war. They too receive gifts for their courage and sacrifice, and they too receive the admiration and gratitude of the people.

In this way, Indian people acknowledge substance abuse as one of our greatest enemies. We mourn our fallen brothers and sisters. We honor those who have fought bravely against it as warriors of a special kind.

The war against substance abuse is fought on two fronts: that of preventing it within our young people, and that of healing those who have fallen victim to it. As the force that binds families and communities together, Indian women are the commanders in this war. Our support and actions can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

"Ask them where they are going, who they will be with, and when they will be home." This is what a current poster and T.V. commercial for teenage drug abuse says. "You are the first weapon against addiction." This might be a good starting point, but how do you keep them talking to you when your world and theirs is growing apart?

As Indian women, we have an advantage in that area because the first lesson we are taught, and that we teach our children, is to respect all

things that exist here on Mother Earth. That especially includes respect for ourselves, our Elders, and each other. Being careful to teach respect by living in a respectful way and treating every one and everything with respect rubs off on our children. It can balance out the bad and arm our teenagers with common sense. So asking questions and encouraging honest answers may be the first shot at preventing substance abuse in someone you love.

The second weapon at our command is our pride in who we are, where we came from, and where we belong. For a long time, this pride was lost. But now it has returned stronger than ever. More formalized prevention programs have been developed around this growing sense of pride. One of these, called *Gathering of Native Americans*, uses the values of belonging, mastery, interdependence, and generosity as foundations for preventing substance abuse. These concepts are reinforced in a combination of storytelling, ceremony, and spirituality.

The *Gathering of Native Americans* program is only one of many offerings available through the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI). You can check out the catalog of Native American and Native Alaskan resources at <http://www.health.org/> or call 1-800-729-6686. If you are interested in starting a substance abuse prevention program in your own community, NCADI has a handy action list called *Making Prevention Work*. You can find it on the Internet at <http://www.health.org/govpubs/mpw017/index.htm>, or you can call the number above and ask for document number MPW017.

Tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana are the top three substances most abused in Indian communities today. However, the use of ecstasy, cocaine and crack cocaine, paint, glue, and other inhalants and rubbing alcohol is increasing, especially among young people. Substance abuse can be seen as a way of coping with unemployment, poverty, boredom, and the lack of good education or job skills. This, in turn, leads to feelings of low self-esteem and hopelessness. In some cases, addiction is passed down from one generation to the next, setting up a cycle that is very hard to break.

The same commitment to family, community, and pride that are the foundations to preventing substance abuse are the keys to helping substance abusers recover from their addictions. In many communities, systems of intervention, reconciliation, and healing based on traditional tribal ways are being set up to help substance abusers. As they did in times past, these systems involve families, community, and the wisdom of the Elders. They are headed by men and women with vision and

commitment. Because substance abuse can lead to crime, these systems cross over into law, as well.

The goal is to restore balance to the lives of women and their families, and finally in the community where they live. Everyone who has suffered from the substance abuser's actions takes part in forming a plan that restores that person to the family and to the community. Where a crime has been committed, the plan takes the place of punishment and jail, and may even include restoring what was destroyed or taking it back to its original state. The most important element is the support given to the individual and the family throughout his or her recovery by the whole community. If you are interested in reading more about Native-based recovery systems, you may want to see *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice*, by Rupert Ross.

It is a sad fact that the long-term recovery rate for people coming out of standard substance abuse treatment programs is very low. In the tribal-based programs, however, the success rate has been high. And those who emerge from the community-run programs have given back to their people by using their experiences to heal the next crop of substance abusers and help set them on the path to better health.

When I watch those who fight substance abuse on a daily basis being honored during Grand Entry, I think of how important their work is to the health and future of all Indian Nations on Turtle Island. As Anishinaabe, I think of how important they are to bringing about the Seventh Fire and in them I see the eagle fly over the drum.

Ah Ho, Chi Mi'igwech to all of you.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."